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## The »frontier« revisited: gold mining camps and mining communities in West Africa

Tilo Grätz, ZMO

### Introduction\*

This working paper discusses the relevance of the frontier concept to the establishment of gold mining camps in West Africa since the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> Exploring the example of the artisanal and small-scale (gold) mining (ASM),<sup>2</sup> I will examine economic, social and cultural aspects of mobile mining communities, their internal social relationships and conflicts with local communities and the state. Local miners<sup>3</sup> establish mobile camps on a very particular internal African frontier (Werthmann 2009, Grätz 2010, Panella 2010, Werthmann and Grätz 2013). I will compare three mining sites and discuss their situation against the background of classical and recent anthropological studies on migration, social innovation and local resource management.

Gold miners in West Africa are mobile young people trying to cope with various economic constraints. Although marked by massive labour migration, a heterogeneous social and ethnic composition and multiple interests and conflicts, their communities are nevertheless characterised by common features of social, economic and legal

dimensions that span West Africa. In the course of this paper, I will examine the characteristics of this emergent new ASM<sup>4</sup> gold mining frontier (Grätz 2003b, 2004), based on the assumption that they constitute relatively (semi-) autonomous social fields (Moore 1978) with regard to their norms, modes of labour organisation and lifestyle patterns (Grätz 2006, 2009b). I will ethnographically compare three mining camps situated in Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali. Basically, I will build my analysis on a discussion of the African frontier theorem elaborated by Igor Kopytoff (1987, 1999). Comparing the case of the artisanal gold mining frontier with other (especially agrarian) settler frontiers in contemporary Africa (Rösler 2004, Doevevspeck 2005, Le Meur 2006), I will elaborate differences as well as commonalities in these frontier processes. Additionally, I argue in favour of a modification of Kopytoff's model (*ibid.*) with regard to the relationship between economic and cultural innovation pertinent to contemporary African mining frontiers. In contrast to Kopytoff, who claims that frontiersmen generate economic and technical innovations but maintain cultural norms and mores, I will demonstrate that frontier communities in my cases are characterised by both economic and cultural transformations. In other words, gold mining communities at this new frontier are marked simultaneously by various quite *novel* social, technical and cultural features, as well as by many older patterns of communication, perception and social affiliation brought by

\* Eine Zusammenfassung in deutscher Sprache findet sich am Ende des Textes.

<sup>1</sup> The empirical data derive from several field trips to Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali between January 1999 and April 2004. Fieldwork was made possible thanks to the assistance and financial support of the DAAD, Bonn and especially the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle an der Saale. For valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper, I am very grateful to Katrin Bromber and Katharina Lange (ZMO, Berlin).

<sup>2</sup> ASM is the most common designation for all modes of non-industrial (artisanal and small-scale) gold mining, cf. UNIDO (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Generally, when not specified, I use all nouns as gender neutral. In fact, the majority of miners are men.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the related debates as less important for the arguments of this paper, I use the term small-scale synonymously with non-industrial, artisanal or informal gold mining and the term mining without distinction for quarrying, digging out or excavating.

the emigrants from their home regions. These parallel processes are influenced and negotiated in relation to the adjacent communities and to pressures from the state. In the light of many divergent processes, it is problematic to distinguish *a priori* ethnic innovation from cultural conservatism, as Kopytoff argues.

Taking the historical dimensions of mining frontiers in West Africa into account, I furthermore propose to distinguish primary and secondary frontiers, i.e., those regions with a longer tradition of mining and migration should be seen in a different light than those that only recently became boom areas. Both types have remarkable differences, especially with regard to power relations between local and immigrant miners.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, I argue that the frontier theorem should be seen as a heuristic category that is nevertheless related to very heterogeneous contexts and conflict settings. In this respect, I agree with Kopytoff that a frontier entails particular political processes, especially the relationships between migrants, local societies and the state (ibid.). Moreover, internal social processes also play an important role in merging people of very heterogeneous social and ethnic origins into a migrant settler community. Consequently, I will explore the various ways of integrating miners into nascent mining communities, despite the many conflicts prevailing in that field.

The paper concludes with a discussion on the unique professional identity of migrant miners in the making. Their experiences are shaped by their constant liminal situation in the camp, specific norms of conflict solution and risk sharing, modes of communication and a discernible lifestyle.

### Gold mining camps and frontier communities

Gold mining areas in West Africa, especially those that have only recently experienced gold booms, establish dynamic and plural frontier zones. These spaces are defined through migration and a particular appropriation of new territories and resources, and they point to regimes of social change.

The concept of the frontier<sup>6</sup> was initially introduced by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) to describe the historical processes of the colonisation of North America by migrants, starting in the 17th century.<sup>7</sup>

5 »Locals« and »immigrants« are only very rough, general categories. There are many more nuances in identities and more social categories involved, see below.

6 Rieber distinguishes between consolidated frontiers, frontiers of progressive settlement and symbolic frontiers, with partially overlapping features (2001: 5813). Other authors define a frontier as a space of economic development and expansion, e.g. Hudson, who perceives a frontier as the »the fluid outer boundary of a growth region« (Hudson, in Dumett 1998: 2).

7 Without always referring to the initial argument, the term was also extensively used in the geographic-political sense,

This theory refers to a frontier of settlement due to mining or the search for land for ranching and agriculture, a frontier constantly changing and advancing into non-colonised territories (although partly inhabited by first-settling ethnic groups) without infrastructures. Turner argued that the existence of an area of »free« land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward was crucial to American history. From this perspective, frontier communities are made up of pioneer migrants as people establishing emergent (often socially heterogeneous)<sup>8</sup> social communities. There were various waves of settlement in North America; the most important among them driven by gold miners in various regions that formed a major focus of Turner's studies. This early study using the frontier theorem has received much criticism, primarily because of its apologetic and idealistic character.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the social processes he referred to are, however, also relevant in other parts of the world. Pioneer migrants in general seem to share many features, although the social organisation of their communities may differ. Thus, the concept was subsequently transferred to other areas such as Africa, Latin America and New Guinea and to depict other economic frontiers, like agricultural or pastoral frontiers, etc. Similarly, the volume *The African Frontier*, edited by Kopytoff (1987), was of considerable importance (especially for Africanist anthropologists) and underlined the significance in African history of migratory movements into new areas, not only on the margins but also *within* existing political entities and colonised territories (a departure from Turner's own historical cases). Kopytoff's model of an internal frontier is much more refined and became the starting point for the more sophisticated discussions of the concept in contemporary African studies in general and recently with regard to artisanal mining (Grätz and Werthmann 2012, see below) in particular.

above all in the historical and political sciences. There is a bulk of literature on the frontiers of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, the cape frontier (Jacobs 2003) etc. Interlocking, constantly negotiated zones between different religious and ethnic groups are often labelled ethnic frontiers (e.g. Lentz 1999, Lentz and Kuba 2006, Pelkmans 2003). Finally, we have to consider the often purely metaphoric use of the term.

8 California, for example, was (already before the gold boom) a multicultural society (Anglo-Americans, American Indians, Mexicans and Chinese and Spanish immigrants), a fact that paced immigration.

9 Turner ignored the perspective of those affected by these movements, who did not conceive these spaces as void or uncivilised at all. Furthermore, his belief that the patterns of behaviour of these pioneer migrants, whom he portrayed as risk-taking, enduring individuals, were the starting point of the soul of »the« American man, an idea also known as the Turner thesis, is questionable.

The internal frontier relates to less-densely populated areas shaped by new waves of migration, the appropriation of territories and resources (Billington 1967)<sup>10</sup> and the establishment of new settlements. The immigrant settlers perceive the new territories as unexploited and lacking in political control.<sup>11</sup> Internal frontiers are liminal zones of particular social interfaces between actors of different interests, resources and cultural backgrounds and between different spheres of exchange. These interstitial spaces are often subject to conflict, but also to novel arrangements. Particularly the gold mining frontier in West Africa, especially the aforementioned boom regions, is such an internal frontier from Kopytoff's perspective, although he developed his model was primarily during pre-colonial times.

Although it forms a belt across the savannah zones of West Africa, this frontier consists of scattered mining sites and camps rather than closed geographic lines. The ASM gold mining frontier is a particular set of phenomena comprising the establishment of various gold mining and processing sites and the appropriation of mineral resources by simple technical means. Furthermore, the gold mining frontier features new massive migratory drifts toward rural areas; the advance of miners' camps or mining villages, including new markets, infrastructures and businesses of all kinds, finally, consumption opportunities and, consequently, rapid socio-economic shifts occurring also in regions that hitherto were only partially integrated into the realm of market economy. The West African gold mining frontier is related to a general boom in small-scale gold mining since the 1980s. It entails (unstable) income opportunities from mining and is characterised by migration especially in the dry season and by a flourishing gold trade (Grätz 2004b). The gold mining frontier is most often related to the emergence of new boom areas as »hot spots« of economic and social change.

### Historical and recent gold booms in West Africa

Gold mining has been practised in West Africa since the 7th century. Several regions had local systems of gold exploitation, mainly of alluvial de-

posits. The most famous regions were the Savannah regions Bambouk, Manding, Bouré and Lip-tako (today Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso), but also forest areas (in today's Ghana and Ivory Coast). Eventually, the trade in gold, along with that in salt, cloth and cola nuts, stimulated cross-regional connections and the proliferation of typical middleman groups such as the Hausa and Djoula. Apparently, gold was forcibly extracted by warrior kings, often by alleged dependents, who may have been slaves. Early accounts repeatedly mention the famous, rather mythical »Kankan Musa«, emperor of the Mali kingdom, who was said to have extracted tons of gold. Subsequently, several regions and peoples began engaging in small-scale mining, especially along the rivers banks and as a side business in the dry season. The scale of these activities often changed over time due to the hazards of demand on the regional and international markets. Arhin (1979), Chauveau (1978), Kiethaga (1983), Schneider (1990), Pillet-Schwartz (1993), Garrard (1980) and especially Dumett (1999) have described extensively the ways in which early gold mining was developed with techniques still partly relevant today. In contrast to recent times, strong hierarchies prevailed in businesses and were exercised essentially by local producers and not so much by migrants. The Asante kings in particular, who used gold as signs of power and items of trade, became famous in the accounts of contemporary merchants (Garrard, op. cit.). These early mining frontiers were often related to the appropriation of formerly unpopulated areas, which often had to be cleared of forests.

With the advent of direct colonial administration and large-scale economic intervention, particularly the Gold Coast regions, widely known for their treasures in gold, attracted investors and developing semi-industrial exploitation schemes in the southern parts of the colony.<sup>12</sup> These mining corporations, often using coercion, also existed in Guinea, Mali, Upper Volta and northern Dahomey (Benin, Grätz 2009b). Thus, parallel industrial and artisanal frontiers emerged with inevitable conflicts between the colonial state and miners trying to work without licenses. Almost everywhere, the post-colonial state preferred industrial mining to the detriment of small-scale operators, who were often persecuted by state agents. There were, nevertheless, many smaller gold booms from the 1940s to the 1970s in less-controlled areas, especially in southern Mali and northern Guinea, as well as the Ivory Coast and Liberia.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, new booms occurred simultaneously in se-

<sup>10</sup> »A frontier process may be described as that process by which individuals and their institutions were altered through contact with an environment which provided unique opportunity to the individual by making available to him previously untapped natural resources.« (Billington 1967: 7)

<sup>11</sup> Kopytoff writes: »[A frontier] is an area which, on the one hand, is beyond the control of regional metropolises and, on the other, is weakly enough controlled by its present occupants that outsiders from the metropolises can move into it with the realistic hope of achieving an autonomous political existence. The frontier presents to outsiders an »institutional vacuum« that makes it open to the possibility of constructing in it a new society« (Kopytoff 1999: 33).

<sup>12</sup> Almost simultaneously, the first boom period in South Africa emerged, enacted by immigrant new settlers. The relationship between gold booms in South Africa and in Gold Coast has still not been extensively studied.

veral regions in West Africa.<sup>13</sup> Illegal forms of exploitation and gold trading (smuggling) developed alongside small enterprises controlled by the state or licence holders. This recent growth of small-scale (artisan) gold mining is related to massive waves of labour migration into rural areas, above all in Mali, Niger, Benin, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast<sup>14</sup> and Guinea.<sup>15</sup> A new feature is the massive engagement in reef mining by numerous migrant small-scale miners. This development has resulted in more profits and more-demanding systems of labour organisation involving more actors. Additionally, the burgeoning mining camps have resulted in new forms of sociability (cf. Werthmann 2010, see below). The exploitation of new mining sites and the reopening of abandoned deposits led in most cases to the rapid establishment of new immigrant communities with new markets, increased circulation of money and the spontaneous development of infrastructures and services, primarily by young men but also by women. Recently discovered mines also led to the massive migration of petty businessmen, traders, barkeepers and those offering other services, including prostitution. Consequently, the gold mining camps in this new mining frontier consist of people of extremely heterogeneous social and ethnic origin. In a short period of time, small villages became larger settlements; new settler communities have emerged in all the countries mentioned.<sup>16</sup> In most cases, the official state law (for example in the *Code Minier*) diverges considerably from local practices, which is especially significant regarding access to resources, labour organisation and the legitimacy of mediators. As a consequence, conflicts often emerge between gold miners and state authorities, but also between locals and migrants and/or within miner interest groups over the rights to exploitation and settlement (Grätz 2011).

**13** The migration to the old mines can be seen as a reaction to crisis situations, especially in the agricultural sector, in which fewer job opportunities, the effects of structural adjustment and the general devaluation of F CFA in 1994 have resulted in higher living costs (»push factors«, for Burkina Faso see Asche 1994: 194f; for Benin, Kohnert 1994, *Cellule macroéconomique* 1997). Other factors, relevant to some areas, are droughts and civil wars (cf. also Vwakyankazi 1992, Hilson 2006).

**14** For recent case studies on gold mining in Burkina Faso, see e.g. Traoré (1989), Carbonnel (1991), Yaro (1996), Gueye (2001), Jaques et al. (2004), Luning (2006, 2008, 2010) and Werthmann (2000, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2009, 2010).

**15** It is estimated that in West Africa about 500,000 people work full- or part-time in small-scale gold mining.

**16** I hesitate to employ the term »gold rush« because it implies too much irrational social action and chaos. I would like to focus on the many more-regulated social relations in the field. I do not deny the dramatic dimensions of the rapid changes in consumer practices, alcohol abuse, the monetisation of everyday life, the production of winners and losers and the use of violence in many gold mining areas.

In the following section, I will present three case studies of mining camps in Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali, followed by a discussion of their commonalities and differences.

## Comparing three mining sites

### *Kwatena, Atakora Mountains (northern Benin)*

As already mentioned, gold has been mined in this region since the colonial period, which was followed by occasional exploring missions.<sup>17</sup> Local small-scale mining did not start until 1992, when migrants from Togo and Ghana first started to exploit alluvial and later reef deposits in the region south of Natitingou. Their initial success set off a gold boom and instigated further massive labour migration from all over the region and abroad. Miners initially profited from a period of political transition in Benin and mined the deposits with simple techniques such as pans, sluices, chisels and sledgehammers. In the following years, government authorities expelled them several times by force and confiscated equipment, money and gold. Over the intervening years, alluvial mining has become partly permitted after a series of negotiations and new expulsions, especially of reef miners. The mining region is situated in the Atakora Mountains in the north-western part of Benin. The gold miners work along the rivers and mountain slopes, exploiting alluvial and eluvial deposits, as well as engaging in small-scale mountain mining.

### *Kobadan / Numusulku, Southwest Mali*

The region of southwest Mali along the Niger River is part of the historical region of Manding. It is inhabited mainly by ethnic Soninké, Malinké, Fulbe herders and Somono fishermen. The peasants combine wetland cultivation (mainly rice) with animal husbandry. In the respective villages, caste-confined craftsmen play an important role. The Manding region in Mali and the Bouré area in northern Guinea Republic have been known since the 13th century principally for artisan gold mining carried out by slaves for Mandé chiefs and kings and by local inhabitants. The region has recently experienced a considerable move to artisanal gold production again. Migrants from all over West Africa, especially Malians and those from neighbouring Guinea, opened old and new mining sites and established huge camps. Many young local people who had migrated elsewhere returned home again.

**17** Although the mine close to the village of Kwatena was known to the locals because of its partial exploitation in colonial times (Grätz 2009a), there was no local tradition of gold mining to that date, mainly due to rigid state control of these zones, which the state considered its sole property up to the end of the 1980s.



The mining camp Kobadan, the main focus of my case study, consists primarily of straw huts. It is situated four kilometres from the important alluvial gold site of Numusulku and some 20 km from the hinterland of the Niger River.<sup>18</sup> There are many such camps,<sup>19</sup> shaped by the presence of people of heterogeneous social and ethnic origins and the establishment of new markets and circulations of money. The locals, in fact, have always engaged in gold mining as a seasonal side business; the young people mined the gold under the auspices of a local foreman, the chief of gold (*damantigi*) and his assistants (*tombolomaw*) in each zone (see below).

Currently, the Malian state only partially intervenes in this »informal« business (Keita 2001, 2002).<sup>20</sup> The mining camp of Kobadan, like that of Niaouléni, was established close to the (predominantly alluvial) exploitation sites, but as a camp apart from the local villages. In contrast to Kobadan, the former camp of Niaouléni became a permanent village.<sup>21</sup> This process also led to the establishment of a marketplace that is situated on the path right between the exploitation grounds and the miners' camp.

#### *Bountwanou, Burkina Faso*

The mining site of Bountwanou in the Gourma region, named after a village about 30 km away, is a quintessential mining camp. The encampment was established only in August of 2001, but subsequently grew rapidly and peaked at the beginning of 2002.<sup>22</sup> Bountwanou was initially a satellite camp for miners based in Boungou, which grew with the latter location's decline in production and the discovery of new veins. This camp was located quite

**18** I carried out fieldwork in this region in 2000 and 2003. The major sites of exploitation shifted several times to new deposits and reopened placers. After several fires in the camp, some of the migrants now live in the growing miners' village of Nioualéni.

**19** Besides the neighbouring Nioualéni, I also worked in the mining camp of Kokoyon, a camp of similar size south of Banankoro.

**20** The government mining board is trying to establish a system of official licences and is promoting foreign investment, with limited success. As regards the small-scale mining sector, the UNIDO has helped set up a program to promote better techniques and to reduce environmental degradation and health problems.

**21** In this camp, local inhabitants obliged people to build only clay houses or to rent from owners of such houses. Officially, this was said to prevent damage by fire.

**22** In March 2003, I visited the camp for the last time. The camp had lost at least three-quarters of its inhabitants, and gold mining was dramatically reduced. Only two traders remained, and only one employee of the CBMP supervised the remaining activities, partly conducted by local dwellers. At this time, the majority of all miners I encountered in 2001 had gone some months before to a more prosperous mine close to Gomboussoukou. A similar move of almost an entire camp to a new site happened some time before in 2001 with the move from Boungou (where today also some remaining miners and locals continue alluvial mining) to Bountwanou.

distant from any local Gourma settlement. The nearest village is some 15 km away. The Gourma are peasants cultivating millet, corn and cotton. Many Fulbe herders also roam the area. Migrants came from all over Burkina Faso, especially from the Mossi regions west and north of Ouagadougou, in large numbers from Niger, but also from Nigeria, Benin and Ghana. The camp comprises a *site d'extraction*, a separated processing area (common also to other sites) and a small governmental outpost of the CBMP (*Comptoir Burkinabé des Métaux précieux*).

**Table 1** General common features characterising small-scale mining communities in West Africa

technical aspects	simple technologies (pans, sluices), manual work, use of motor pumps, sometimes use of pounding machines; seasonality
organisation of labour	organised mining teams, »sponsor system« patronal mode of organisation interethnic mining teams
gold trade and market integration	gold traders organised in patron-client networks from petty traders to wholesale traders offering cash on the spot, advancing money/working as moneylenders to a large degree »illegal«
migration	balance of seasonal and permanent migration, professionals and part-time miners
spatial strategies, modes of settlement	settlement often in remote places mostly close to extraction sites; markets and lodging often combined; predominantly independent mining camps; partly renting from landlords; seldom own buildings
legal aspects, modes of internal conflict resolution	particular set of rules on access to resources, property regimes modes of sharing, reciprocal relations among miners
relations of immigrant settlers to the local communities	often conflicts over arable land, wells or religious sites; tensions

Comparing the different case studies is evidently not an easy task, since it normally requires that all data and findings be discussed within a similar framework. The process of fieldwork was in all cases a very exploratory one, always involving not only place-specific, contextual knowledge, but also

a sharper perspective honed through comparison and investigation in several locations. Additionally, I am dealing with *emergent* structures and norms that are undergoing permanent shifts. In the following sections, I will, however, try to discern some important commonalities as well as differences among the three mining sites. In general, I compare technical aspects, the organisation of labour, forms of migration and the appropriation of space, as well as legal aspects. On the basis of this framework of analysis, I will inspect basic commonalities and differences pertinent to all case studies examined here. The general common features relate to the criteria summarised in table 1.

There are other similarities shared by all different gold mining sites that emerged in a boom period. In a diachronic perspective, for example, one may first find a period of a sometimes violent appropriation of resources and harsh tensions within the migrant community and between migrants and locals. Following the tensions, the internal and external relations of the mining communities stabilise and there are phases of negotiations with adjacent societies before finding more reliable mutual arrangements.

After the end of a boom period and the departure of the majority of miners, the local population, along with the remaining miners, start taking over many pits to continue small-scale mining as a side business at a lower intensity. New activities continually emerge at the abandoned sites, as infrastructure continues to be used and local dwellers profit from the experience gained. Even after the decline of a local gold boom, considerable economic changes persist. Some people use the acquired capital for small shops, others specialise in itinerant trading and head for the bigger towns.

#### Commonalities and differences

All of these common elements could be further explained in detail and show pertinent variation in accordance with basic local conditions and contexts. In the following, I will discuss some of them. First of all, I examine the modes of labour organisation and legal aspects, including those of internal conflict resolution. Analysing the organisation of labour, we see in all cases an intricate system of labour division, including hierarchies, shift work and modes of sharing. The main actors in the mining fields are: patrons or chefs d'équipe, assistants or secrétaires; team miners, assistants and guards, but also women and children who pound and mill (in reef mining) and mobile gold traders (see below). These categories could of course be refined to differentiate social and ethnic origin, age, gender etc. Generally, miners work in small teams headed by a team chief, who is in most cases also the owner of a shaft.<sup>23</sup> The shaft

owner may work with trusted organisers and/or work himself in various phases of the extracting works. In any case, he is a petty entrepreneur, investing in equipment and the maintenance of his/her workforce, and is generally rewarded with half of the yield. Smaller, especially alluvial deposits (placer gold) may be worked by mini-teams sharing the yields more or less equally. They are petty entrepreneurs, investing in several shafts and »sponsoring« the teams. In all cases, the entrepreneur bears a small risk of getting only part of his investment back, because yields are uncertain. The gold trader also acts as a »sponsor«: a moneylender trying to bind clients and diversify income opportunities. This system of risk sharing (Grätz 2003a, 2009b) occurs in all three cases, especially in reef mining. However, the productivity of gold deposits and the exploitation period varies among the sites. This scenario is a kind of trade-off. On the one hand, the more uncertain the yields, the higher the possible gain for the shaft owner in case of success. On the other hand, the shaft owner has to supply the basic needs of his assistants, regardless of yields. The size of each team differs. Sometimes teams are very small, especially in alluvial mining, and sometimes very large, especially in reef mining, which involves sub-teams working in shifts. Additional hierarchies may be a result. In all cases, the degree of formalisation of both the teams and the organisation of work is low. In many cases, the aforementioned internal property regimes stand in contrast to local norms and to state laws, creating a particular plural legal situation without necessarily leading to conflicts. Access to gold deposits and rules of exploitation are linked to modes of simple appropriation by anteriority (on a first-come basis), either by force, negotiation and/or compensation. Furthermore, the aforementioned patron-client mode of labour organisation marks the small entrepreneurial activities and places the mining chiefs at the forefront of decision-making and arbitration processes. The typical property regulations at the various sites generally comprise the »right of first discovery« to exploit a shaft, provided that the person is able to meet the basic investment needs (equipment, workers, rituals). This right of use is primarily tied to actual exploitation and participation by workers, paying tolls and respecting sharing rules. Furthermore, such a »holder of rights of use« may rent or lease a shaft in exchange for various shares. Finally, there is often the possibility to work in turn, e.g. dividing up shafts (prosperous veins).

Often, the owner of a mine has to pay contributions to local landlords, to ritual authorities or to the common funds of the miners. Generally, the rights to the exploitation of shafts and pits are allotted to the person who discovered them and

<sup>23</sup> For a hard day's work, miners may earn between 2 and 50 Euros.

started exploitation first, assuming he or she<sup>24</sup> has access to all necessary technical and financial means to do so. In case this person does not possess these means, either completely or partly, he/she may conclude some sort of contract with a small-scale entrepreneur or patron who engages in exploitation for shares in the yield or the payment of a lump sum or recurring compensation. Sharing in this context means the sharing of the yields in accordance with the division of roles; the investor as the head of the team receives the biggest share (50% in most cases).<sup>25</sup> Additional shares for all members are divided in accordance with contributions in work and skills. There is always a minimum guaranteed share, irrespective of illness and other factors, provided that the venture was successful. However, the share may also vary in accordance with the individual's work ethic.

The shaft owner operates as a small-scale investor, but should at the same time act (with all rights and duties) as team leader (*chef d'équipe*). If the owner is not able (or not willing) to participate personally in running the extraction work on site, he/she may hire a miner as a trusted organiser (*secrétaire*). Thus a chief's actual participation in the exploration and extraction work may vary from active continual engagement of his own labour force to the hiring of agents and specialists for each task. The patron usually procures working equipment, rents motor pumps, feeds the workers and pays medical costs when needed (which he may deduct later when the profits are divided up). The shaft owner (*patron, chef de parcelle, chef de trou*) acquires the use rights for the period of effective exploitation of the shaft or plot. He/she may lose these rights if he/she abandons the shaft for a longer period of time or lets it to others (with or without compensation, rent, shares etc.) for a longer period of time. This also applies when the shaft is abandoned even if, after significant time has elapsed, the mine proves to be very profit-yielding when exploited by successors. Such an occurrence is a widespread cause of dispute, which is generally settled in favour of the most recent user, who nevertheless may be asked to pay off a certain amount of compensation to the first »explorer«.

Taking the actual exploitation into account, we cannot employ concepts of property (in the clas-

sic, narrower sense),<sup>26</sup> but rather to temporal use rights, because these entitlements have to be renewed by continual actual engagement on the mining site. On the other hand, there may be cases of »selling the claim« when an owner no longer has the means to exploit it, wants to leave the mining area permanently or »rents out a shaft« during a limited absence. The terms of contract may include either finite payments or shares in raw products (gold containing ore).<sup>27</sup> A second pattern of use rights applies to relatively large, productive shafts that are difficult to exploit by only one team or that were discovered by several teams. In this case, the teams work in turn. One or more teams may often work for a week or up to ten days before others may enter the shaft. The previous team will engage in processing work and subsequently rest, waiting for their new period of exploitation. This process keeps the team small, allowing easier management by the individual team leader.

All territorial rights of exploitation (in terms of limits between shafts or zones of exploitation)<sup>28</sup> are debated and divided among the shaft owners. This process can hardly be regarded as permanent personal property assignment because this allocation is, as mentioned above, closely linked to actual usage of the shafts. As a consequence, delimitation disputes are also settled *within* the group of shaft owners. These quarrels between individual shaft owners occur more often, whereas conflicts between groups of shaft owners from different villages are infrequent. Such disputes may occur when larger, productive shafts are discovered. In these instances, and when the shaft allows a division into sectors, the gold veins are commonly exploited by several teams in turns. Miners regard these arrangements as equitable in accordance with their own values. These concepts of justice are often opposed to the local land rights of the adjacent communities, above all those of farmers. The latter, regarding the disputed areas as their own, frequently demand compensation. The consequences are, nevertheless, quite diverse. Frequently, continually stressful confrontations result in violent clashes between miners and locals. In most cases, working arrangements are made, like the payment of some compensation and fee for rituals (Benin, Mali). However, the central tenet is that all mining areas officially belong to the state; therefore local land rights cannot be officially claimed and are

<sup>24</sup> The vast majority of shaft owners are actually men. I encountered only one case of a female shaft owner (in Benin).

<sup>25</sup> Most miners regard these arrangements as fair and risk-sharing for two main reasons: first, the shaft owner may lose almost all his investment if the shaft is not productive at all, but at least the workers were maintained during the work. If the team is successful, he consequently earns a higher proportion and may deduct his expenses; and second, he knows or should know best how to organize works, including the rental of pumps etc., but also how to defend the mine against competitors; these are preconditions for its success.

<sup>26</sup> Hann, however, employs a much broader definition of property (2000: 1). Cf. also von Benda-Beckmann, Franz and Keebet (1999).

<sup>27</sup> In arrangements similar to tenancy, there are rarely fixed sums, but rather irregularly paid shares (in most cases in raw products), the amount of which is very much determined by the actual success of the team.

<sup>28</sup> The delimitations of zones and claims are marked out (with the help of charcoal, wooden barriers etc.) in the presence of witnesses.



subject to individual negotiations. In the case of Kobadan (Mali), the amount of this compensation and other duties is high, because a local vigilante group (*tombolomaw*) established a forceful management (see below). In other cases, as in Bountwanou, migrant mining chiefs were successful in simply refusing to pay more than a few fees.

Generally, hierarchies in gold mining are flat. They are related to differences in position in the organisation of labour; the heads of teams and »sponsors« become small-scale entrepreneurs, leaving room for continual renegotiation of power relations. Sometimes, *big men* with outstanding guiding and organising aptitudes dominate, acting both as small-scale entrepreneurs and as mediators (Werthmann 2003a). Generally, a need for organisational skills explains why many migrant miners accept power holders, despite their lack of formal legitimacy. Some power holders augment their power when state agents more or less recognize them, often in hopes of playing them off against others. Typical conflicts are those between mining chiefs disputing the limits of their mines, the possibility to enlarge them or share them and possible »thefts« in yields. A wide range of quarrels usually occur between workers and chiefs over sharing, betrayal and the proper use of equipment. A third domain is relations to local inhabitants and state agents.

Conflicts are often adjudicated by a sort of assembly of all mining chiefs, which exists in various forms with various degrees of formalisation, stability and effectiveness in all the presented cases. As a rule, gold miners try to avoid appealing to any court outside their group. Only in very few cases were problems presented to the local village head and even more rarely to governmental authorities. The basic differences between the cases include the degree of involvement of state agents or local authorities in these matters. In Kwatena, Benin, the police were rarely called and the village authorities dealt only with conflicts that did not involve mining. Only recently was the state able to intervene in these matters. Despite the aforementioned divergent interests, I found many instances of reciprocity and equity among miners across the various case studies. I already mentioned systems of risk sharing between small pit owners and miners, as well as between miners and gold traders.<sup>29</sup> For example,

**29** I see the social hierarchies as an accepted part of the »rules of the game« in the mining field. They are based on patron-client relationships and cannot be explained simply in terms of exploitation or oppression, but rather through an ethics of risk sharing. For example, miners can accept that a bigger share of the profits is reserved for the patrons in exchange for the supply of materials and expertise and for managing capacities, while accepting the risks entailed in mining. A good team leader, miners say, is someone »who knows« not only where and how to exploit gold veins and to organise the shifts, but also how to work properly and how to

in many cases a miner will get the same share if he has been absent for some time because of an illness or family affair, while his portion may be reduced if he has been lazy or unreliable. Moral obligations include a fair and equal division of hard work and the acceptance of sanctions, but they also imply accepting different tasks in accordance with a miner's level of experience, expertise and physical capacity (Grätz 2009b).

Elements of a moral economy (Scott 1976) of gold mining are important aspects of the rules and modes of organisation in many mining teams. Apart from these informal rules, concrete institutions help guarantee benefits for all and organise redistribution. The fact that mining entrepreneurs, team leaders and successful traders are supposed to contribute more than others to fundraisers in times of need is important, because these donations not only limit their accumulation, but also represent a sort of instrumental taxation.<sup>30</sup> These schemes most often occur in contexts in which migrants live close to the locals or even settle in their villages, for example in the Atakora region of Benin, where adjacent villages have become mining camps.

Another aspect of the particular moral standards among young gold miners is the realm of spare time, including ostensive forms of consumption and recreation (cf. also Werthmann 2008). These attitudes are favoured by the large selection of consumer goods, fashionable clothes, food and alcohol etc., but also video cinemas and dance parlours in most mining camps. There is, for instance, the mutual obligation to invite each other to drinks or food, which is far from being a waste of money, but can be seen as a reinvestment into the community.

I have described the general social and cultural situation in most mining camps, which in its actual shape very much depends on a camp's demographic size and distance from bigger towns and markets. In the following section, I will return to the basic technical aspects and working arrange-

conduct the excavations in a way that avoids injuries and accidents. His experience will give him respect and prestige, and the miners are more inclined to follow his advice. Team leaders have to live up to their role, including »being fair«, if their workers are to stay with them and not join another team leader for the next extraction cycle. Hierarchies thus contribute to creating a security of working arrangements. They are flexible enough that former gold diggers may become team leaders or small entrepreneurs after acquiring experience, esteem and, of course, sufficient capital.

**30** There are also fundraisers (*cotisations*) organised by representatives of the local population. They dare not a tax solely for the exclusive benefit of the locals. This contribution in cash and in kind may be redistributed during festivities, but also in forms of communal infrastructure like schools and medical centres, churches etc. that are in principle open to all.

ments within the (AS) gold mining frontier in West Africa and underline the importance of the gold trade within that system.

#### *Technical aspects*

Similar mining techniques are employed in all aforementioned cases, especially in alluvial gold mining, in which miners chiefly work with pans and sluices, hoes and shovels. A typical reef gold extraction cycle consists of the extraction of gold-bearing rocks in the galleries or pits; the pounding and milling of the gold ore (mostly done by women); and washing and panning to separate out the gold dust. The most important steps in the extraction of alluvial gold are the digging of pits, the extraction from gold strata and finally washing/panning using sluices and pans in several refining steps. Miners will use either motor pumps or simple pans at the same site depending on the financial assets of the teams or entrepreneurs. Differences are primarily in the way the pits are established. Since alluvial mining follows the river sediments in Benin, larger trenches are created. Special wooden tablets are used that are produced in a village in Togo. In reef mining (dominating large parts of the Atakora site, northern Benin and the Bountwanou area, Burkina Faso), a miner works with pickaxes, chisels and sledgehammers. He usually extracts gold in mountain shafts together with one or two mates. In contrast, mining in the mountains is much harder and more hazardous (especially deep beneath the surface), but these rocks usually contain more gold. A full ethnographic account of technologies and procedures of extraction would exceed the scope of this paper. Differences include the use of crushing machines, which, however, are used only in Bountwanou and some other sites in Mali and Ghana. The use of mercury is very widespread in Burkina, but not in Mali and Benin.

Generally, mining teams conduct their daily business on the basis of unwritten, oral rules, contracts and agreements. Exceptions sometimes apply to specific tasks like shifts, but credits, too, are written down. Some better educated people tend to proceed this way and are often hired by mining chiefs as secretaries. The associations of miners only partly formalise the rules and proceedings. The most important task for the secretary is to accomplish a record of formally recognised cooperatives (which hardly ever represent the totality of the active corporate groups) and to write letters to the state administration. In Mali, the degree of literacy is generally very low; similarly, I only rarely came across any written documents in Kobadan. Nevertheless, to avoid quarrels, one member of the *tombolomaw* wrote down all accepted pit owners in a booklet.

#### *Gold trade*

Usually, gold is sold in small amounts on the spot to petty traders. Local scales and simple gold

weights such as 1 FCFA coins and matchsticks are used. Most of the local petty traders operate as trading agents for master traders. Together, they form informal and international trading networks<sup>31</sup> that lead all the way up to international gold traders (Grätz 2004b). Most gold traders act as moneylenders, consequently obliging the miners to sell their gold to them. These gold traders are an important element in the system. They link the guild-like production of gold to the wider market economy by offering immediate benefits. Gold traders usually try to bind miners as clients by giving them loans that oblige them to sell them gold. The constant need for cash obliges miners to sell their gold immediately, which promotes a proliferation of the trade of moneylending. Very often a network of traders is based on patron-client ties and the sharing of risks between local and town-based wholesale traders.<sup>32</sup> The legal status of gold traders differs, depending on official state politics. In Mali, the gold trade is not officially allowed, but is not persecuted, in contrast to Benin and Burkina. In Kwatena (Benin), the state has no local trading boards but works with agents. Illegal gold trade has declined, but still persists due to the higher price that illegal gold traders offer. In Bountwanou, as in other such camps in Burkina Faso, there is a system of licensed gold traders operating the daily business in a particular section of the camp. They in turn are obliged to sell to the local branch of the governmental gold board CBMP, buying gold once a week in their small office, employing strict policies as regards prices, weighing etc. In Burkina Faso, as well as in Benin, official and non-licensed traders continue illegal trading actions.

Small-scale gold mining in West Africa is conducted mainly in two ways: as a side business carried out by the local populations close to mining pits (particularly in alluvial gold extraction) or as activity primary occupation in some mining sites. The latter is linked to the influx of many migrant miners, either leading to the enlargement of previous settlements or to the establishment of new mining camps. The cases discussed here belong to the second category. Such mining sites arise in one area and then another. In all these cases, however, the number of miners decreases considerab-

**31** The way gold trading networks are organised is similar to trading systems in rural markets, where trading agents act as intermediary buyers on behalf of master traders, e.g. as Saul describes for Burkina Faso (1997) and Adanguidi (2001) for Benin. The main difference here is, however, not its (official) illegality, but its heterogeneity in terms of the ethnic and social background of traders on different levels of the system. Gold trade does not fit into the »ethnic argument«: it is neither embedded in kinship relations, nor does it constitute a distinct corporate group with an exclusive group identity, at least not yet.

**32** For an account of the various risks in gold mining, see Grätz (2003a, 2009).

ly during the agricultural high season and increases considerably in the dry season. Numbers may also change in periods of festivities and religious duties. Factors like rainfall and rivers drying up can also trigger the seasonality of activities.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from these changes in numbers, the inner composition of the mining communities differs in accordance with the time spent in the mines and the degree of professionalism. Miners rarely return to their home regions, but engage more continuously and exclusively over a longer period of time in gold mining, moving to new mining fields or exploring them when necessary. Migration is linked to the diffusion of the special arrangements, norms and roles guiding small-scale mining in several such mining camps. Migratory patterns also set up new economic circles related to the circulation of goods, to new traffic connections and to the proliferation of skills, financial assets and knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Migration, modes of settlement and relations of migrant miners to the local communities*

The rapid establishment of new mining camps can be observed in many parts of West Africa. These nascent communities do not begin with a dearth of knowledge; rather, skills and practices are imported with the movements of pioneer migrants.

The retrospective accounts of a young local gold miner in Kwatena, northern Benin, serve as example:

We went to meet a Togolese in Tchantangou in 1992. First, we only helped him carry some goods and mount a motorbike. The second time we encountered him on the way back from Kara (Togo), where he said he had just completed a successful business transaction. He told us that he was getting gold from the mountain rivers. One day we visited him and helped him with his work at the Perma River. Consequently, he gave us some gold dust. Some days later, we sold the gold and made some 50,000 FCF. Soon others arrived. Our mate told us that there was more gold in the mountains. He organised a mining team, bought some equipment and conducted the extraction work. He explained to us the rules and modes of conduct, including the rituals to observe. Some other Togolese arrived later,

friends and acquaintances of his, to work with us. They became the first mining chiefs. (Michel, August 2001, Tchantangou)

This account is typical of narratives of the start of the mining boom in the Atakora Mountains in northern Benin. This narrative of origin may blur the actual facts in many ways, but it shows that at its core the mining boom was related to the immigration of non-locals to the region. The migrants (mainly young men) not only initiated the business (by simply ignoring local prescriptions from the state and parts of the local population) through the introduction of simple technologies, know-how and organisational skills. Together with other experienced miners, the pioneer migrants also introduced some basic rules, norms and perspectives that have subsequently been appropriated by some local and most immigrant miners. They adopted and constantly shaped this emergent internal *modus operandi* of gold mining in accordance with changing technical and logistic requirements, the development of the gold market and later interventions by the state and local village authorities. Miners in all these camps developed a particular mode of consumption, enabled by the great varieties of services and goods on offer. This includes a well-established culture of extensive drinking, smoking and eating practices; hair and other dress codes; but also partying and visits to bars and cinemas. Some of the young miners spent their money as fast as they could earn it in ostentatious ways.<sup>35</sup>

The work and lifestyle, sociability and self-perception of Beninese migrant miners correlate with the main elements of what Bulmer (1975) called *occupational community* in the making, sharing leisure and workplace (id.86), a socio-cultural form related to a distinct group, their social positions and dispositions.<sup>36</sup>

Generally, there are two patterns of settlement. First, migrant miners have frequently established mining camps composed of makeshift tents, straw huts and shelters (the most widespread examples are Bountwanou and Kobadan). Second, migrant miners (and locals) have otherwise either rented houses or built their own (Kwatena) in villages close to the mining sites. The Kobadan site combined both of these elements; in addition to a huge mining camp adjacent to the mining pits, the small village of Kobadan (some 5 km from the mining site) included an enlargement of several houses built in concurrence with the new mining

<sup>33</sup> In Kwatena in Bénin, miners have a weekly, small-scale pattern of migration as a way of commuting to Kwatena, possibly due to short distance and frequent transport availability.

<sup>34</sup> In the case of ethnic Anyanga miners (Togo), we are dealing with typical pioneer migrants, specialised in alluvial mining, who at the same time are part-time yam growers. They reinvest large parts of their income from gold mining (carried out over some three or four months of the year) into hiring labour working on their plantations back home. They are thus able to multiply their earnings in a rather short period of time.

<sup>35</sup> Many local inhabitants offer goods and participate from the mining boom.

<sup>36</sup> Utilizing the historical example of North America, Richard Knapp characterises such mining communities as »... domestic space of people who often were or are heterogeneous in character, of diverse origins, and drawn together by the need to work« (Knapp 1998: 4).

boom. The reasons for the establishment of camps instead of finding housing in villages are manifold: first, the general presence of villages (e.g. there are no villages at all close to Bountwanou); and second, the willingness of local inhabitants to accept migrants. In Kwatena in Benin, the locals were at first quite reluctant to accept migrants, but later saw the possibility of earning some additional income from their presence directly in the village. Another factor is the sustainability of gold extraction at a certain site, offering longer prospects that may incline people to build more permanent accommodation.

The new gold boom sites are all marked by a heavy influx of strangers from various places. Evidently the migrants are obliged to establish viable social relations with local populations, especially when villages are located close to the gold fields. These relations are often marked by strong tensions, but may also lead to »working arrangements«, especially in cases where local inhabitants are already or about to become gold miners. In other words, the major normative elements described above regard local rules, institutions, interests, prescriptions and power structures. I will present this relationship along with the following criteria: competition over land and resources, the handling of disputes, juridical subsystems and finally patterns of settlement.

Local communities are often split between those who engage in mining and the more farming-oriented people, between those who participate in markets, selling goods of all kinds to the migrants or renting out houses, and others who see the influx of strangers as a threat to local traditions. We should not conceive of gold mining in West Africa as marked by a simple tension between local, indigenous people as a kind of homogenous group, threatened by mining, and opposed to immigrant *outsiders* and the state. In all the discussed cases, the threat is some selected issues like land rights and water rights, which are often solved by working arrangements with migrants. On the other hand, local settlers may profit in many ways from the mining booms, offering labour services, market goods, housing and infrastructure. Local villages may profit in various ways by a reversal of strong out-migration of local youth. Many inhabitants of Kwatena stress that »*now most of all youngsters came back to Kwatena*« and characterise this process as a positive result of the local gold boom. On the other hand, they also point to the rapid social and cultural changes induced by an increased commoditization of everyday life, which they do not consider so positive.

However, the migratory drift towards mining camps results in very divergent, conflicting perspectives of migrant miners and traders, local or adjacent societies, and state agents on these frontier processes. Miners often view the appropriation of new territories as equitable if, in their

perception, they establish camps distant from settlements, fields or pathways in a sparsely populated rural area. Pioneers in particular consider themselves »developers« of void regions. They claim a valorisation of new grounds, point to the advent of infrastructures resulting from their actions and markets and display a general arrogant view. Although exceptions exist, this phenomenon is especially present in »remote areas«. »Nobody was there before our arrival« is a common statement by migrants, as is: »We were the ones who brought new markets, incomes and life to the region.« Urban traders in particular show little regard for local cultural specificities, although they try to keep on good terms with the locals.

Conversely, local dwellers, especially the more farming-oriented, often perceive the massive influx of foreigners as a threat to the continuity of local culture and the balances in local economic life. Especially elder people and religious authorities attach religious significance to the same territories, which often play an important role in their self-awareness and identity. This, however, often contrasts with the patterns of local youth and women, who see economic opportunities in the new mining camps. The fact that young local inhabitants share many elements of the discourse of autochthony and religious authority more often has to do with their wish to establish control over immigration and very often over the resources and their share in it. Their position has less to do with a possible feeling of loss that may be associated with the perspectives of their elders in these debates. Even when they are about to damage fields, gardens or pastures, they consider digging for gold more valuable. The divergent perspectives on the effects of local gold mining booms are certainly a matter of interests, professional attitudes and experiences that differ between locals and migrants. However, differing approaches are also due to a difference in cognitive and religious appropriation of territories, as reflected in discourses of autochthony versus valorisation of land. These differing discourses and perceptions of migratory movements and economic changes involve many internal contradictions and divergences within these groups, which nevertheless are major actors in political spheres.

In Kwatena, the immigrant miners first came into the region unhindered; only later were the locals able to establish systems of control and to exact tolls. In the Malian case of Kobadan, the power relations greatly favour the locals, who control the migrants and whose vigilante group obliges them to pay fees. In the mining camps of southern Mali, often far from any regional centres with police stations, mayors and other official offices, the local population has managed to control the influx, activities and much of the public behaviour of the strangers. Local inhabitants (the large ma-



jority being ethnic Soninké) were able to set the rules of access to the resources and to establish a particular system of jurisdiction and control. The central institution here is called *tombolomaw*: a type of youth vigilante group that is associated with a particular village and its agricultural zone and headed by the *damantigi*,<sup>37</sup> the local »lord of the gold«. Their role differs, of course, from one village to the other, but in most cases they supervise all mining activities. In the local discourse, the *tombolomaw* are often represented as a simple assistant group serving the *damantigi*. In fact, they may work in close cooperation with him; in my observations they nevertheless enjoy noticeable autonomy and, in some cases, they control the *damantigi*.<sup>38</sup> The *tombolomaw*, together with the *damantigi*, determine who has the right to exploit a pit and the amount of taxes miners have to pay to the locals. They also organise important ceremonies and rituals, and they control the observance of proscriptions to assure continuing profits from mining without doing harm to local taboos and while ensuring symbolic avoidances by local as well as immigrant miners. The roles of *tombolomaw* and *damantigi* as traditional authorities were previously only relevant for a particular time of the year and for locals. However, the advent of the new gold boom has increased the importance of the *tombolomaw*. Their tasks were expanded to include the immigrant mining communities and the newly established mining camps. Before the new gold boom, they acted more as a village defence organisation against thieves and managed the yearly gold campaigns and particular rituals. Similar to hunter associations, they still occasionally perform special rituals in the yearly ritual calendar. Today, they operate as a legislating, arbitrating and sanctioning body for all affairs that concern the extraction of gold, life in the new mining camps and

parts of local economic systems related to the mining camps. In many cases, they simply appropriate a wide range of juridical powers in their villages and also intervene in affairs that are not related to gold mining or the mining camps. The *tombolomaw* are charged to sanction almost all transgressions and quarrels, but deal mostly with cases of theft and murder. Finally, they are ideally expected to hand those they seize over to the police, who are often geographically far away. Cases of vigilante justice, including poisoning locals who transgress the laws of the *tombolomaw*, have been reported, but seem to be rare. A simple form of sanction is to demand compensation. A more dramatic possibility is the expulsion of delinquents from the mining region. The *tombolomaw* hold regular and ad hoc meetings. In these meetings, recent affairs are debated and sanctions against those who act against their norms are decided. In some camps, they work together with elected representatives of immigrant mining groups. Their legitimacy derives from the wish of the first-comers, who are in control of a certain agricultural zone, to control the influx of strangers into a certain territory. They maintain a strong autochthonism discourse applicable to all strangers, especially to Malinké from neighbouring Guinea. An important source of power is the financial assets they command, deriving from the multiple taxes and payments for their activities.

But it would be too easy to reduce their interests to economic gains. Considering that their ranks consist mostly of youthful members, the *tombolomaw* also represents a counterbalance to the elders and grants social power and prestige in a region previously marked by emigration and loss of economic and social options for the younger generations. In this context, the local population becomes able to control the influx of migrants, in contrast to other regions and earlier periods.<sup>39</sup> Parts of the population establish hegemony not only in respect to migrants, but also in relation to state agents. On the other hand, the state agents are simply not willing to intervene in the creation of infrastructures or in legal matters through their physical presence. *Tombolomaw* do not fill a particular gap between the state and the local societies or still operate on the fringes of state interest. Rather, they create links between the mining camps and the villages of the region, between different circles of power and between various economic actors and religious domains. Hence, their

**37** The *damantigi* is related to a particular village, its territories and the local clans as first comers in the area. He officially assumes control of all gold mining activities. He decides where to open a new pit, how to organise the works, how to assign particular periods of the year for mining activities (in former times limited to the dry season, with the influx of migrant miners obsolete). The *damantigi* is expected to conduct special ceremonies and rituals promoting the productivity of the mines and the health of miners and minimising the spiritual »dangers« of gold. My research indicates that access to this office seems to be quite differently handled in each village. A *damantigi* is obviously always male and at the same time a clan elder and head of a farming/gold mining household. But in some cases, the *damantigi* is only elected for a certain period of time and may then hand this office over to a successor. In other cases, it is a lifetime-job for a member of the same (expert) clan of the village. A wide range of dissimilarities, however, opens when it comes to the actual power, mining capacities and prestige of a *damantigi* in one of the villages.

**38** Vigilante groups are a very frequent contemporary phenomenon in rural areas elsewhere in Africa, as well (cf. e.g. Pratten 2008, Kirsch and Grätz 2010).

**39** The ways the local population reacts to the influx of strangers are quite diverse. In some cases, villagers, not interested in gold mining at all, are able to defend their territories and simply expel miners. In other cases, the immigrants are able to appropriate resources without any concession. In other villages, multiple arrangements establish a balance between locals and immigrants miners, although conflicts over land, settlement and water resources remain frequent.



role varies with the specific context. They attempt to guarantee political continuity in a rapidly shifting economic context and refer to moral values in a changing environment. Many local Soninké and Malinké inhabitants, eager to engage in mining and obliged by the verdicts of the *tombolomaw*, develop a distanced view of the role of the *tombolomaw*. This development again indicates that, in various power configurations, local inhabitants are often divided with regard to gold mining by immigrant miners.

In Bountwanou, the distance of the mining camp to the local villages is quite important, so that there is no direct competition over current land use. However, village heads and mining representatives from Gourma villages (who also engaged in mining) frequently contact the association of miners. The group's leader and a local Gourma also maintain a friendly rapport, since the latter helped the former explore the region. The stakes are, however, not always arable land. Sometimes disputes involve practical and/or religious matters, i.e. whether the locals have permanent access to waterholes, road usage, the veneration of earth shrines etc. Occasionally, migrant miners who try to explore new gold mines or exploit new deposits meet strong resistance from local populations or are even driven out of the region (Werthmann 2001).

In all these cases, migrants form clusters in accordance with regional origins as well as new associations that overlap regional affiliations. The latter possibility generally applies to the heterogeneous mining teams, whereas in the camps, miners socialise with mates from the same region. Often there are delegates of certain groups of migrants. Their role is in all cases limited to issues that rarely deal with the mining activities as such. As a rule, these agents represent members of more than one region or one ethnic group. In the case of Kwatena, a Togolese resident is the only foreign migrant delegate. He is expected to deal with issues impacting the Togolese population, regardless of ethnic origin. In Bountwanou, a Hausa chief presides over his constituency and is simultaneously the head of a butcher guild. In Niaouleni, a homogenous group of migrants elected a speaker. The acceptance of these intermediaries varies, however, from individual to individual. Ethnic differentiation plays only a limited role in the mining camp, due to the specific labour organisation, flexibility or the constellation of mining teams. The aforementioned internal norms are not associated with a particular group. Ethnicity is more related to discourses of »autochthony«, e.g. of local inhabitants legitimising privileged access to resources or special tax. Miners are more vulnerable vis-à-vis the local inhabitants and the state when they are not able to maintain effective internal cohesion despite their divergent interests and their camps as a self-regu-

lated space of a strong mining community (Douglass 1998). They may manage this with effective institutions of conflict regulation and by guaranteeing the subsistence of many.

#### *Relationship between mining communities and the central state apparatus*

Generally, the relationship between the miners and the central state cannot be subsumed under a single model. We have to distinguish at least between the state as a legislating and policy-making apparatus, on the one hand, and state agents in the field, on the other. These intermediaries occasionally act in accordance with their own agenda, often against official legislation, but they are nevertheless important players in local power relations. The relationship to the state may also differ between sites in the very same country and may change over time. Generally, the state regards mining rights as its sole domain, e.g. mining resources as national property are subject to management and allocation only by the state. This principle is entrenched in the official legal framework of the Mining Law (*Code Minier*) of each country. This system, associated with a discourse of »national interest«, generally overrides local land rights. The degree to which the state actually enforces these laws depends on:

- the state's general knowledge about the local mining activities,
- its capacities to be present and intervene,
- the scope of the mining activities,
- whether an industrial investor may be interested in establishing a large-scale or medium-scale scheme and
- changes in general policies over short periods of time.

The latter point is important to mention because legal insecurity does not derive from a conflict between national laws and miner interests per se. Tensions often arise due to rapidly changing, contradictory and unpredictable state policies that the miners have difficulties adapting to.

Gold miners in Kwatena, northern Benin, generally ignore national laws. Miners disregard any official demands for formal licensing to explore and to exploit deposits, disrespect any commercial registrations, commit tax evasion, work in forbidden zones and smuggle gold.

The Beninese state initially did not intervene at all. Later, several missions were staged to expel miners. First, a cohort of the *gendarmérie* deployed at the site; its members were bribed to allow further mining. Once these forces were withdrawn, many miners just returned to the gold fields. Government policy shifted towards a partial legalisation in 1999. Since then, a series of negotiations have started, aimed at organising gold miners into cooperatives that will sell their gold

to the state. At the end of 2001, new expulsions took place, because the miners were considered stubborn about accepting the conditions set for them, i.e. selling gold to state agents (offering lower prices) and because a medium-size enterprise arrived and signed a contract for a larger territory and demanded exclusive rights. Gold mining has been limited to selected alluvial deposits, and most reef miners and foreigners were forced out of the mining region. Some local miners were, however, »bought« by state officials and enjoined to exercise controls. These changes undermined the miners' previous group cohesion.

In Bountwanou, Burkina Faso, the state was initially simply not present, because of its lack of knowledge of the new migratory shifts and a dearth of personnel. In 2001, a spartan outpost of the CBMP (Comptoir Burkinabé des Metaux Precieux), the Burkinabé Precious Metals Office, was established to control the gold trade. The fierce CBMP officer stationed at this location simultaneously acted as a self-declared policeman and set up his own regulations. Furthermore, he tried to settle conflicts and persecute thieves with the help of an armed *gendarme*. Nevertheless, people could buy exemption through bribery.

The way individual state agents act differs from one place to another. For example, state agents in Kobadan (in their outpost in Banankoro) tried to reach working arrangements with the miners, whereas the aforementioned representative in Bountwanou behaved like a sheriff. In Bountwanou, however, the state does not intervene in many of the internal affairs, but acts only in cases of conflicts. This is different from the situation in Kwatena (Benin), where miners still try to solve the bulk of their problems on their own, and especially from Mali, where state agents appear only from time to time. In Mali, the *tombolomaw* are more or less accepted by the state and replace it to a large extent. In Mali, state intervention is insignificant compared to the other cases, but depends on whether a larger mining scheme is planned or not. Officially, a larger mining enterprise cannot be implanted without first agreeing to compensations for loss of land. In Kobadan, however, there has never been any direct intervention at all. In contrast to Benin, Mali state agents try to gain shares only by demanding tolls from the minibuses leaving the region, especially those heading towards Bamako. Control on the Mali-Guinea border is comparatively lax. The three countries regulate environmental and poverty issues very differently. The Mali state implemented a special project to improve the situation of small miners and to protect the environment, especially through training and providing tools at selected sites. In Burkina, a few spontaneous campaigns and missions were carried out to reduce the use of mercury (similar to Ghana). In Benin, no development projects focused

on small-scale gold mining, apparently because the state has less interest in gold mining than in other stakes in the development business. In Benin, the miners were briefly (1999-2000) officially organised in a council (*federation des orpailleurs*). However, in light of recent events, the assembly has completely changed its function, members and attitudes. The current members are no more than helpers of the administration and are not accepted by fellow miners. In Burkina, the state established local representations as outposts of the mining board, often guarded by policemen. In general, they do not intervene much in the internal affairs of the mining communities, but try to act as conflict arbitrators upon request.

In most of the studied cases, the state allows migrants and the local population to negotiate local agreements; but in all these contexts, the state may change its policy when there is the possibility of allocating mining rights to big international contractors.

### **Summarising the particularities of the West African ASM gold-mining frontier**

The gold mining frontier is a very particular socio-economic field, caught between modes of entrepreneurial action highly embedded in market economies and various norms of reciprocity. On the one hand, these locations feature a variety of divergent interests, conflicts and continuous negotiations, especially in regards to resource access and yield sharing. On the other hand, certain rules and modes of organisation prove to be stable and are similar across various mining camps. Many differences are due to the local context. Basically, differences between the situation of various gold mining communities may be explained both in reference to very local facts – as in the case of Bountwanou (and partly in the case of reef mining close to Kwatena), where there are no nearby villages and therefore no major disputes over land between local farmers and immigrant miners – and general national situations, like the general physical distance of the state in remote areas in Mali, which increases the room *tombolomaw's* scope for manoeuvre.

Two dimensions shape the situation of small gold mining in its local particularities and divergent contexts: on the one hand, there are structural features: e.g. pre-existing local institutions; the degree of heterogeneity of the settler communities; modes of migration; the aforementioned state laws and the modalities of its implementation in the local context; and changes in the general domestic market economy and the global market (mediated by the gold price). On the other hand, we have to analyse the role of key actors; dynamic entrepreneurs, mediators and local *big men*; the strengths (or weakness) of networks; plus the dynamic local reactions and effects of particular

**Table 2** Comparative aspects

	Kwatena	Bountwanou	Kobadan
property rights	conflicts over mining resources religious sites  working arrangements, taxes local big men interfering  local mining chiefs	few conflicts water rights	often conflicts over arable land  local land with the gold  local militia regulating access to resources
explanation	villages distant from the mines		
		water an important resource	
		land not fertile, out-migration	
arbitration  local conflict resolution	guest-host relations	few contacts to local miners	local militia regulating observation of rituals, and conducting arbitration  dominance of local mining chiefs
explanation	miners living in villages  close ties to the locals	distance  miners outnumber locals	history of gold mining  local institutions able to accommodate new immigration
Role of the central state	state generally per- secutes miners selected agents	working arrangements with mining chiefs	state is distant
explanation	extreme shifts in policies  state against indepen- dent communities  persecution of foreigners  state is helped by ar- med guards	state confines role to controlling gold trade  internal organisation untou- ched, arbitrary personal interventions  state is helped by armed guards	spatial distance  lacking capacities  state acknowledges vigilante group  state confined to managing industrial gold mining

events. All these aforementioned circumstances allow the extrapolation of general tendencies in the formation of mining frontiers. The following hypotheses provide a greater understanding of the dynamics of such locations:

1. The more gold mining was a known phenomenon to a larger region, the stronger the position of the local societies vis-à-vis incoming miners in such primary mining frontiers (see below). Furthermore, these regions have increased capacities to develop profit strategies from their experience and to extend the realm of local institutions to the mining camps.
2. Heterogeneity, in terms of ethnicity and social status, religion or nationality of miners, does not automatically lead to conflict.
3. The pioneer migrants may transport norms, modes of exploitation and discourse to other places. This allows newcomers to join the business.

Beyond the many similar logics of labour organisation, techniques and camp organisation, every site and every mining frontier<sup>40</sup> nevertheless features its own cultural particularities.<sup>41</sup> Such local mining cultures, pertinent to the life-worlds of each mining camp, are composed of different elements of everyday culture, habits and routines, as well as many informal rules. I refer to these unwritten re-

<sup>40</sup> Provided an understanding of local cultures as plural, hybrid and interlacing systems of practices and thought that are shaped by many local as well as external influences that cannot be essentialised, but only described in a depiction of a moment.

<sup>41</sup> In all cases, miners observe more or less voluntary ritual prescriptions, taboos and ceremonies and contribute to collections for such rituals. The degree to which they actually believe in these rules differs, as does the ability of opinion leaders to dominate the discourse. In Mali the number of taboos seems to be the greatest. They include the prohibition of work on Monday, of work before burials have finished etc.

gulations in each setting as soft rules. They may be constituted by local prescriptions. In the Mandé area of Mali, for example, people automatically stopped working if a death occurred, regardless of the status and occupation (miner or local resident) of the deceased. Monday is usually the day off for miners, which corresponds to the weekly market day in adjacent villages. Minor differences concerned the construction of houses and huts, ways of greeting and consumption habits, e.g. the omnipresence of espresso coffee at Malian sites and the copious amounts of alcohol at the Benin and Burkina sites. A local culture is also shaped by specific environmental circumstances, e.g. the constant threat of fire in the miner's camps in Mali and Burkina, whereas camps elsewhere might be endangered by floods.

In most mining locations, there are various modes of norm transgression, i.e. modes of behaviour such as gambling, excessive drinking, extravagant clothing and partying. The cacophony of large markets, bars, video cinemas and other entertainment facilities accompanies the existence of mining camps and sharply contrasts with the rather quiet atmosphere in ordinary villages in their vicinity.

Excessive modes of consumption are more accepted in the mining camps than in the home villages of the young migrant miners, as I could detect when visiting some of the villages in northern Benin from which many migrants come. Although not usually the initial reason to participate in mining activities, hopes of consumption bound many miners to the camp. Especially younger, unmarried participants stayed, regardless of success.

Returnees mostly paint their experiences in a positive light, triggering quite a series of dreams, hopes and envy among those who stayed at home.<sup>42</sup> The latter may be hesitant due to the perceived challenges of going to the mines: crossing long distances, the hardship of work, the sanitation conditions in the mining camps and the uncertainty of yields. But they also develop their own grandiose fantasies about the opportunities and potentials for riches that may await them in these places. In this regard, a gold mining frontier (especially in more remote rural areas) is an imagined frontier: a projection of all kinds of positive imagery revolving around joyful living and the fulfilment of young people's dreams. Conversely, the aforementioned consumption aspects in the mining camps lead other, especially elder, conservative residents and locals in neighbouring villages to portray these camps as breeding grounds of evil, decay and anarchy. This more negative discourse again focuses on only one, but quite visible, aspect of the mining camps.

<sup>42</sup> All this is very reminiscent of other cases of migration (and masculinity). Cf. Graw and Schielke (2012).

## Primary versus secondary mining frontiers

Differences between the case studies of Bountwanou and Kobadan indicate divergent experiences between regions with longer involvements in gold mining and those only recently deeply impacted by these phenomena. I classify a *primary mining frontier* as a region that has only recently experienced a massive influx of gold miners, the appropriation of territories and their resources, the advent of goods and markets and considerable state interventions. With my distinction between primary and secondary mining frontiers, I would like to emphasize the historical dimension of various mining frontiers. Historical aspects include subsequent differences related to local particularities, like the degree of novelty and economic impact of gold mining for local residents and thus the dimension of changes they show. A primary mining frontier is a social situation in which independent small-scale gold mining was newly introduced into a certain area or, when not novel, was forgotten as a source of income, and where the massive influx of migrant miners was a new and considerably dramatic event. Such primary mining frontiers are related to the large-scale appropriation of alluvial or reef gold deposits, especially by migrants. These locations are linked to new mining camps or burgeoning small villages and the establishment of new markets, roads and services in these areas.<sup>43</sup>

As another ideal type distinct from the former, a *secondary mining frontier* is a region where gold mining is not a recent development. In these contexts, the migratory waves and the establishment of new camps and villages is already an acknowledged factor. A secondary mining frontier is typically constituted by the revitalisation of older mining areas because of crises, but also by new techniques, new spectacular findings and/or facilitated conditions of movement of people and capital. Such examples can be found in the mining regions in southern Mali. These two regions are ideal types, but there are many intermediary cases between the two categories. The main reason to distinguish these types is their very diverse power relations, as well as varying routines, norms and regulations concerning gold mining.

The regulations that dominate the secondary mining frontiers are due to two processes: previous encounters and conflicts with migrants and the participation of locals in gold mining. Local inhabitants here often practice gold extraction mining as a side business, but usually try to enforce their norms upon newcomers. Secondary mining frontiers often feature the involvement of local authorities as

<sup>43</sup> A primary frontier may show different features when there has been earlier massive immigration of agriculturalists into the same areas, though this still differs in many respects, such as scale, the number of people and the monetisation of everyday life.

regulating forces. This does not mean that relationships between locals and migrants can be inserted into a predetermined social framework. In the case of Mali, the system of control established by *tombo-lomaw* was only effectively introduced in 2000 with the gold boom, due to a change in the attitudes of local authorities with the establishment of better control over migrants. A secondary frontier is also distinguished from a primary frontier by the fact that migrants mostly do not perceive the region as lacking in institutional regulation, as stressed by Kopytoff (1999). Usually, the migrants are quickly made aware of previous experiences that have led to strong regulatory demands by the locals.

Gold mining frontiers do not always develop on the periphery of political spaces, but also often within. Nevertheless, they frequently create completely novel modes of resource utilization, economic circuits and social fields. In most cases, they form frontiers of ethnic and/or regional identities that are connected to power struggles over natural resources. Compared with other liminal zones, a gold mining frontier tends to be more dynamic with regard to settlement patterns and economic changes, and it features a higher *potential* for conflicts based on resource competition. Mining frontiers do not consist of easily distinguishable regional borderlines. Agricultural frontiers, for instance, are dominated by different spatial strategies of the migrants. New settlers stay at least a season in the same location, and in most cases stay for longer periods, although many wish to return home as soon as possible.

Another internal African frontier that allows comparative discussion is the new settler area on the southern fringes of Lake Chad (Krings and Platte 2004). This region attracted many migrants engaged in fishing and agricultural activities. When the water partially ebbs, Lake Chad offers an abundance of wetland crops and fish yields. Crops and smoked fish are marketed and sold in the big cities of the region, offering important income to the producers and a variety of traders, entrepreneurs and servicemen. The social organisation of migrants differs here from most mining frontiers because ethnic affiliations play a very important role. Most migrants stay for a longer period and return each dry season. The degree of control the local Kanuri population exerts over the migrants seems to vary in accordance with the economic sphere in question. The local authorities were able to expand property rights to land also into the newly cultivated regions of Lake Chad and to allow a yearly tenancy in return for crop sharing (usually a tenth). Immigrant fishermen, in contrast, were able to establish a more independent working and property regime, building up associations and intricate marketing systems.

Agricultural frontiers settlements are not likely to have stable populations, and older settlers often

hoped to return one day to their home region. Yet, a greater steadiness in the settlement structures and spatial strategies of the migrants prevailed. New settlers stayed in the same place at least one season and often longer, although many wished to return home as soon as possible. Agrarian colonisation often initially led to seasonal and chain migration and later to more stable settlements that became villages. In contrast, when very prosperous deposits are discovered elsewhere, miners immediately leave the camps in large numbers, followed by traders and service providers. A mining camp may grow into a village or simply disappear. On the other hand, some adjacent villages or small towns may experience substantial immigration and expansion, leading to larger, heterogeneous villages. Or a settlement might just degrade into a ghost town«. The occurrence of these very divergent potential developments depend on a variety of factors, of course the abundance of gold, but also supplementary income options in the region, markets, security and the local and national political climate. Tracing the recent shapes of such camps after big boom periods, both Katja Werthmann (2003a,b; 2008) and I observed a similar process: the miners who are more professional, especially those specialised in reef mining, immediately leave the camp as soon as a new deposit in another region promises to be more productive. When the new deposit cannot be reached easily from the previous camps, the miners simply transplant their camp into the new region.<sup>44</sup> Some miners, however, often stay in the emptier camp, enjoying less conflict and stress from controls and specialising in techniques less mechanised and more labour intensive (alluvial and eluvial mining).<sup>45</sup>

In terms of age and gender, the demographic composition of agricultural frontiers is more balanced. The gold mining frontier tends to attract primarily very young, unmarried men as migrants, much more than women, who often tend to come from the region itself. In both cases, migrants move in accordance with economic booms while still maintaining networks back home.

Conversely, both types of frontiers often feature conflicts over land between migrants and the locals, with various forms of arrangement. Local inhabitants, even when in a minority position, display a high degree of ethnocentrism. Furthermore, throughout West Africa these residents tend to emphasize discourses of autochthony (Grätz 2014, see below). To discern different types of frontiers

<sup>44</sup> To visit these camps in Burkina Faso often resembled a pursuit: on a second visit, the camp may already have been displaced, and fieldwork plans may have to be changed accordingly.

<sup>45</sup> Members of the adjacent communities often continue mining, especially in the dry season or a selected period of the rainy season.



may hint at logics that explain their pertinence. In some regions, we witness an interlocking of several frontiers. In southern Burkina Faso, people originating from northern territories migrate also in search for new arable and wet lands. In some parts of southern Mali, migrants stayed after the gold boom to start agricultural activities, transforming a gold mining camp into peasant villages. An important difference lies in the structure of markets, which tend to be more fluid in gold mining frontiers. Furthermore, the exploitation of gold is possible throughout the year, although many migrants prefer the dry season and combine gold mining with agricultural activities back home.

To sum up, the gold mining frontier in West Africa differs both from its famous antecedents in North America (Billington 1967) and from pre-colonial and more recent agricultural frontiers though dynamic shifts, the instability of settlements and camps, the micro-economic effects and the social composition of migrants. In this regard, my analysis of the internal West-African mining frontier challenges Kopytoff's distinction between more cultural conservative elements and those of frontier ethnic innovation. Gold mining (as well as diamond mining, cf. De Boeck 1998) areas are, in fact, frontiers marked by less state control. There are, however, some points of debate. The first objection is that Kopytoff places too much stress on the conservative cultural elements inherent in frontier communities. He underlines the distinction between cultural and social traits: social and ethnic structures may change, but there is a continuation of tradition as an important way to rebuild the community and ensure livelihood, which is much more important than innovation.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Kopytoff, I argue that frontier communities may give room both to social and cultural innovation, social restructuration and cultural imagination, plus transgression in the process of community building. Gold mining communities in northern Benin, for example, feature both the emergence of friendship ties (Grätz 2004a) and interethnic relations, often in contrast to the political relations in the respective miner's home region, and the importation of known institutions of guest-host relations into the new context. Both technical knowledge and cultural norms, whether introduced from other areas or not, undergo substantial transformations in the new context.

The norms, rules and contractual relations of gold mining sites explored in my case studies are

specific to gold mining and differ substantially from other spheres of exchange, including agro-pastoral domestic production, craftsmen and traders. These local cultural mores are renegotiated in accordance with the new geological and social circumstances at new mining sites.

## Conclusion

I have described the various social and political features that prevail on gold mining frontiers in contemporary West Africa. Based on a comparative study of three mining camps, I explored commonalities and differences characterising a socio-economic field marked by dynamic shifts in migration and a growing professionalism of actors with various social backgrounds.

Even though many conflicts over access to resources recurred, processes of social integration emerged. The arrangements among the various mostly heterogeneous ethnic working teams, as well as those between immigrant gold miners and local inhabitants, are negotiated and established on an informal basis. I have argued for the emergence of a distinctive economic and social sphere, shaped by the specific method of gold extraction and labour organisation, but also by income distribution, linked to spheres of circulation and consumption, including the emergence of markets, services and methods of accumulation. Gold mining is a very particular socio-economic field, organised between equitable corporate logics, modes of risk-sharing and entrepreneurial economic logics, differing substantially from the agro-pastoral domestic production, craftsmen's shops or trading networks.

Many normative rules and institutions concerning the organisation of labour, access to natural resources, hierarchies, profit-sharing and conflict resolution »migrate« from one camp to another, while being partly shaped by local institutions and social structures.<sup>47</sup> In this process, often *big men* (Werthmann 2003a), but also local power brokers and groups like the *tombolomaw*, are able to appropriate managing and adjudicating powers and intervene. In other cases, mining communities develop their own ways of conflict settlement, without recourse to any institution.

The differences between the various local situations depend on the figuration (Elias 2004: 141) of local power structures, but also on external interventions, especially by the central state, and on economic changes as regards the availability of mining resources and the development of markets.

<sup>46</sup> Kopytoff writes: «Inherent in the frontier process is a certain degree of cultural conservatism. The frontiersmen may see themselves as being innovators, free to construct what society they will, but in reality they bring to the task of social construction a given cultural baggage. A technological tradition, assumptions about human nature and the nature of political man» (1999: 33).

<sup>47</sup> This trans-nationalisation of a very particular legal field has an important side effect: it enables migrant miners from heterogeneous backgrounds, and newcomers in particular, to relate more easily with others. To a certain extent flexible enough to adopt local institutions and migrants' concerns, it promotes the rapid development of a minimal social order and trust in the newly established mining camps.

In contrast to the pre-colonial contexts for which Kopytoff developed his frontier concept, the state is never completely absent from the West African mining frontier. The state, however, often follows inconsistent policies towards migrant miners, from expulsions to partial connivance (Benin), from privatisation to the establishment of development-aid projects (Mali), to simple observation and control of some sectors like gold marketing (Burkina Faso). Despite the relative semi-autonomy of gold mining communities, state policies both direct intervene (like the CBMP in Burkina Faso) and have discursive effects. Such consequences were especially observable in Mali, where local actors used the official policies promoting decentralisation to justify systems of taxation, as well as to legitimise *tombolomaw*.

In this article, I put forward a more complex interpretation of the relevant figurations and transformations in this social field. My approach contrasts with the writings of Igor Kopytoff (1987, 1999), who put too much emphasis on the distinction between technological innovation and cultural conservatism. This critical perspective, I argue, applies both to historical and to contemporary frontier settings.

The relations of migrant miners to the local communities vary considerably and may change over time, depending on local history, modes of settlement and effective local institutions. The future of the entire sector depends largely on the interventions by the central state and the domestic and global markets and remains wide open.

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## Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag diskutiert die Relevanz des *frontier*- (Siedlungsgrenze) Begriffes im Hinblick auf die Einrichtung von Goldminencamps in Westafrika seit Mitte der 1990er Jahre. Am Beispiel des handwerklichen Goldbergbaus in Westafrika werden die wirtschaftlichen, sozialen und kulturellen Aspekte mobiler Bergbaugemeinschaften, ihre internen sozialen Beziehungen sowie Konflikte mit den lokalen Gemeinden und des Staates untersucht. Dabei werden drei Goldminenorte verglichen und ihre Situation vor dem Hintergrund klassischer sowie jüngerer anthropologischer Studien zu Migration, sozialer Innovation und lokalem Ressourcenmanagement in Westafrika analysiert. Der *frontier*-Begriff dient dabei als heuristische Kategorie, um die sehr heterogenen Kontexte und Konfliktsituationen miteinander vergleichen und in einen größeren räumlichen Zusammenhang setzen zu können. Ich nehme dabei den Ansatz von Igor Kopytoff zur Untersuchung historischer Siedlungsbewegungen in internen *frontier*-Räumen Afrikas auf, modifiziere diesen aber insofern, als ich Migranten der Goldgräber-*frontier* sowohl wirtschaftliche, politische als auch kulturelle Innovationspotenziale gleichermaßen zuschreibe. Schließlich werden Wege der Integration von Goldsuchern unterschiedlichster Herkunft in die entstehenden Bergbaugemeinschaften, nachgezeichnet, die sich trotz vieler in diesem Bereich herrschender Konflikte offenbaren.

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